

**HED: *HAMLET***

**SUBHED: A SYNOPSIS OF SHAKESPEARE'S FIVE ACTS**

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ACT I

King Hamlet of Denmark has recently died, and Denmark is in a state of mourning—and, as it happens, celebration, since Hamlet's mother has quickly remarried his uncle Claudius, who has become king.

A ghost is seen on a platform before Elsinore Castle. Who is the ghost, and what is he trying to tell us? This is the mystery with which the play begins. The ghost looks like the elder Hamlet—but why is he here?

The King and Queen profess not to understand why Hamlet still mourns his father's death, when it's been two whole months since this event. Hamlet deeply distrusts Claudius.

Laertes, son of Lord Chamberlain Polonius, gives his sister Ophelia some brotherly advice, warning her not to associate with Hamlet: She will only be hurt. Polonius reiterates this advice, telling Ophelia not to return Hamlet's affection for her since he fears that Hamlet is too high-born to truly consider her as a future bride. Ophelia complies.

Hamlet meets the ghost of his father on the platform, follows it to learn more, and is told that his father was poisoned by Claudius. The ghost tells Hamlet to avenge his death but not to punish Gertrude for remarrying. Hamlet swears his companions, Horatio and Marcellus, to silence over the meeting with the ghost.

ACT II

Polonius learns from Ophelia that a disheveled Hamlet met her, studied her face, and promptly left. Polonius believes that Hamlet's bizarre behavior has been aroused by Ophelia's rejection, and decides to relay this to Claudius. The king instructs his courtiers (and Hamlet's oldest friends) Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to find out what is causing Hamlet's strange "transformation."

Polonius puts forward his own theory about Hamlet's discomposure. Hamlet plans to stage a play to test whether Claudius really did kill his father, as the ghost has claimed.

ACT III

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern report to Claudius on Hamlet's behavior. Hamlet is eager for Claudius and Gertrude to watch a play performed, to which Hamlet has added lines pertinent to the story he hopes to uncover.

Claudius and Polonius eavesdrop on Hamlet and Ophelia's private conversation. Hamlet suspects that Ophelia is being used to spy on him and is increasingly hostile toward her.

Claudius decides to send Hamlet to England. No longer believing Hamlet is merely lovesick, he recognizes the threat his brother's son represents. Claudius agrees to Polonius' plan to listen in on Hamlet's conversation with his mother after the play in the hope of learning more about Hamlet. An acting company arrives at Elsinore. The play, *The Murder of Gonzago*, mimics the ghost's description of old Hamlet's death. As the play proceeds, Claudius' reactions convince Hamlet that his uncle did indeed poison his father. Hamlet agrees to speak with his mother in private.

Claudius admits his growing fear of Hamlet, and orders his departure for England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In soliloquy Claudius reveals his guilt in the murder of his brother and realizes that he cannot escape divine justice. Hamlet sees the guilty king at his prayers, but refuses this opportunity to kill Claudius because a murder in this particular circumstance would send him, and not his uncle, to hell.

In Hamlet's interview with his mother, she begins by scolding Hamlet but Hamlet turns the tables, causing her to be very upset. Polonius cries out from his hiding place and is stabbed by Hamlet. Hamlet barely turns a hair at this murder, continuing to rebuke his mother, but is restrained by the appearance (to Hamlet alone) of the ghost, who urges him to be gentle with his mother. Gertrude (obscurely—not saying much but expressing a great deal) contemplates her own sin and redemption.

#### ACT IV

Through his wife Claudius learns of Polonius' murder: The victim, he realizes, could easily have been him. He expedites Hamlet's departure for England, first instructing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to find out where Hamlet has hidden Polonius' body and bring it to the chapel. Hamlet refuses to tell them where the body is, revealing his distrust and contempt for them. He agrees to see Claudius. They circle each other, both aware that the other is a threat. Hamlet is told to go overseas, supposedly for his own safety. Once Hamlet is gone, Claudius reveals his plan to have Hamlet killed en route to England.

The death of Polonius leaves its mark on Ophelia; she becomes mad from grief at losing both her father and her lover. Laertes storms the castle, demanding to see his father and crying for justice at his father's murder. Claudius attempts to calm him.

Horatio is greeted by sailors who have news of Hamlet and proffer a letter from him. A letter also arrives by messenger for Claudius from Hamlet, who is now back in Denmark, having dispatched Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths at sea. Laertes and Claudius, having a common enemy, plot Hamlet's death in an "arranged" fencing match between Laertes and Hamlet. Laertes and Claudius learn from Gertrude that Ophelia has drowned.

## ACT V

Horatio and Hamlet have a conversation with a gravedigger and Hamlet famously reflects upon mortality. At Ophelia's burial the doctor's assumption that she committed suicide angers Laertes. He and Hamlet fight in her newly dug grave, Hamlet protesting that his was the greater love for Ophelia.

Hamlet explains to Horatio how he avoided the death planned for him in England and disposed of his minders.

Summoned by Osrlic to fence against Laertes, Hamlet arrives for the contest. They fight. Gertrude drinks from a poisoned cup of wine meant for Hamlet. Hamlet wins the first two rounds against Laertes but is fatally wounded by an envenomed sword in the third. In a scuffle, they exchange rapiers and Laertes is stabbed. The Queen dies, but not before warning Hamlet that the cup she drank from was poisoned. Hamlet and Laertes are both mortally wounded. With the same poisoned sword, Hamlet stabs and kills Claudius.

The dying Hamlet asks Horatio to tell his story. Amid the carnage, Horatio promises to do so.